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# Agenda Setting in Uganda: Influencing Attitudes on Land through Policy and Persuasion

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# **Agenda Setting in Uganda: Influencing Attitudes on Land through Policy and Persuasion**

**Anne Pitsch Santiago, University of Portland**

## **Abstract**

The Government of Uganda (GoU) has been actively advocating land reform and modernization, as demonstrated in the *National Development Plan 2010-2015* and other official documents. With the adoption of these policies, there has been a rise in contentious relations between different actors within society, and while widespread violence has been kept in check, reports of small-scale violence over land continues, and dissatisfaction with government land policy exacerbates land tensions and the potential for larger-scale violence remains a serious potential threat. The research questions explored in this article are: in what ways and through which strategies does the GoU attempt agenda setting on land policy and economic modernization, and what are the limitations of this approach? The basic thesis of this article is that underlying the GoU's efforts at land reform and modernization of the agriculture sector is a belief that state-led policy implementation can drive the changes in culture and lifestyle amongst the rural peasantry that will catapult Uganda into a "modern" society within a generation. Yet, because of the very nature of the government as a quasi-democratic state with extensive presidential authority and inconsistently applied rule of law, its primary imperative is maintaining power. The rule of law and implementation of land policy remain secondary to the perceived needs of political expediency. Hence, the GoU's policies of modernization as well as its inability to relieve societal and political tensions related to land are undercut by its own political ambitions.

## **Neoliberalism and its Critics**

Land grabbing has become an explosive topic within development circles and in the halls of academia. One component of the debate is whether land is primarily a commodity, or whether it should be conceptualized more broadly to include its

importance to livelihoods and culture. Today in Sub-Saharan Africa, 85% of the poorest families live in rural areas and the majority of these are engaged in subsistence agriculture (Holden, Otsuka, & Place, 2009). In Uganda, close to 88% of the population are rural dwellers (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012), while 80% are employed in agriculture (Uganda National Farmers Federation, n.d.). Of those employed in agriculture in Uganda, 74% of households engage in subsistence agriculture rather than commercial endeavors (Deininger & Okidi, 2003). At the same time, the population density in Uganda has increased from 48 persons per square kilometer in 1969 to 124 persons per square kilometer in 2002 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Poverty has also increased in absolute numbers from 7 million to 9 million (James, 2010), even though the overall poverty rate has declined from 56% in 1992/93 to 31% in 2005/06 (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2010). The population pressures, as well as pressure arising from both internal and external actors advocating both for land reforms and access to acreage for their own food or biofuel needs, have led to concerns over the future of land use in Africa, especially given the poor performance of the agriculture sector over the past 45 years (Holden et al., 2009).

The main purpose of this article is to explore two fundamental questions. First, in what ways and through which strategies does the GoU attempt agenda setting on land policy and economic modernization? Second, what are the limitations of this approach? The thesis of this article is that underlying the National Resistance Movement's (NRM) efforts at land reform and modernization of the agriculture sector is a belief that state-led policy implementation can drive changes in culture and lifestyle amongst the rural peasantry. Yet, because of the very nature of the NRM government as quasi-democratic, the primary objective of its leadership is maintaining power. The rule of law and implementation of land policy take second place to the perceived needs of political expediency, and implementation of land laws and land policies are neither consistently executed nor evenly applied across regions and sectors of the country. Hence, the government's vision of modernization is undercut by its own political ambition and is unlikely to be fulfilled while the NRM maintains its monopoly on power. The politicization of land policy and economic development more generally also has the potential to lead to increased violence on a larger scale than is currently occurring within Uganda. The major approaches to land reform and critiques of each are briefly discussed before I analyze why the Ugandan government chose neoliberal modernization as its approach to land reform. Following these sections, the specific case of agenda setting by the Museveni government will be explored.

Since the 1990s, two major approaches to land reform have dominated the debate. Wendy Wolford (2007) labels these two approaches neoliberal and populist. Neoliberal political economists focus on the value of land in its relationship to the evolution of trade while critical economists do not see the commodification of land and labor as progress, but rather as exploitation (Wolford, 2007). The neoliberal approach emphasizes the need to maximize efficiency of land through land use planning and especially through property rights enforcement (DeSoto, 2000; Deininger, Ayalew, & Yamano, 2006; Joireman, 2011). The populists assert that

land should be conceptualized as a negotiated right between stakeholders and that the development of norms related to land rights are influenced by culture, customs, and history. Populists accuse the neoliberals of reducing land to a commodity, which negates its importance to social relations, culture, and custom (Wolford, 2007). The most visible actor promoting the neoliberal view is the World Bank (Byamugisha, 2013; Deininger, Ayalew, & Yamano, 2006) while numerous academics (Akram-Lodhi, Borras, & Kay, 2007; Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2010; Martinello, 2013) and activists (Friends of the Earth, 2012; Oakland Institute, 2011) hold the populist view. Many African governments, including the NRM government of Uganda, have accepted the dominant neoliberal arguments and have established policies that promote land reform and modernization of the agriculture sector.

While the debate over the best way to reform land policy in the largely agricultural states of the global South continues to be examined by activists and political economists, this article contributes another dimension: understanding how the reform process evolves within a specific political framework. It analyzes state policy development and agenda setting and how these processes are influenced by political and economic forces. It traces the evolution of the Ugandan government's adoption of a neoliberal approach to land reform, its attempts to move society towards its own development vision, and the constraints that it faces in doing so. Given that both the GoU and local stakeholders such as farmers, landowners and other land users, agro-businesses, and NGOs have vested interests in land policies, better understanding how political and social structures and constraints impact the policy debate is extremely important. Understanding this process is essential in order to assess the potential for conflict amongst different sectors of society and will have implications for other societies undergoing similar land reform processes.

## **The Evolution of Uganda's Modernization Agenda**

### **Methodology**

A historical analysis of the socio-political environment in which the Museveni government has pursued its land reform goals reveals a number of domestic and international factors that have influenced the land reform agenda. After I establish the domestic and global factors that have influenced the NRM government's adoption of a modernization approach to land reform, I then analyze the constraints that face the Museveni government's attempt to implement the adopted policies and the strategies that Museveni uses to champion his reform agenda with the public. To answer the two research questions, in what ways and through which strategies does the GoU attempt agenda setting on land policy and economic modernization and what are the limitations of this approach, I analyze three years of policy speeches and remarks made by President Museveni as he traveled throughout the country and met with public servants as well as his constituents. In all, I examined 258 press releases related to land policy, agriculture, or economic development that the State House published to highlight Museveni's presence at various occasions

between January 2012 and January 2015. During many of these occasions, Museveni encouraged, scolded, or exhorted his people into changing their way of life to better support the modernization agenda that Museveni's regime has set in motion. In order to make the argument that Museveni intends to cajole his constituents into changing their culture and ways of life in exchange for modern development, I specifically searched for 27 different conceptual terms and also determined the target audience (Tables 1 & 2). In addition, I include a number of quotes from Uganda stakeholders that demonstrate some of the key concerns they hold and how they interpret the government's agenda. These stakeholders were interviewed over three weeks in May-June 2013 in Kampala, Gulu, Jinja, and Bugala Island. Working with a researcher from Uganda Martyrs University, I was able to interview 23 elites in various professions from academia to local government to the legal and NGO sectors, engaged in two focus group sessions with Uganda farmers and local leaders within Acholi country (n=39), and also attended a training workshop for farmers on Bugala Island (n=25).

### **Brief History of Land Relations in Uganda**

There are excellent analyses related to the history of land reform (Nkurunziza 2006; Okuku, 2006), land reform and customary rights (Coldham, 2000; Mamdani, 2013), land tenure and its impacts on the agriculture sector (Bategeka, Kiiza, & Kasirye, 2013; Deininger, Ayalew, & Yamano, 2006; Pender, Jagger, Nkonya, & Sserunkuuma, 2002; Place & Otsuka, 2002), the unintended consequences of land reform (Hunt, 2004), recommendations for improving the land reform process (Batungi, 2008; Jagger & Pender, 2001) and land tenure and ethnicity (Green, 2006) in Uganda, but an analysis of the processes that have been driving the modernization agenda is warranted.

Uganda has four land tenure systems that have their roots in pre-colonial political systems as well as the British colonial administration. At independence, the Buganda King lobbied for independence from the rest of Uganda and was granted a special autonomous status (Nkurunziza, 2006). This special status did not last because the Buganda demanded even greater autonomy, which resulted in the federal government abolishing all kingdoms in 1966. The government appropriated all kingdom lands as public land, and under Idi Amin in 1975 the Land Reform Decree nationalized all land. Legally, all land tenure systems were abolished under this decree, though people retained the use of their traditional lands. At its inception, the major challenges of the Museveni government were to restore peace and stability and to improve political and economic governance after the chaos of the Obote and Amin regimes. The NRM government restored its relationship with global lending institutions and donor governments, and began to establish a vision, embracing neoliberal reforms, for the economic future of the country. Museveni also restored the Kingdoms of Uganda in 1993 and re-established the four traditional land tenure systems in the 1995 Constitution, reaffirming them in the 1998 Land Act. The 1998 Land Act also established the rights of both landowners and *bona fide* occupants of land, instituting nominal ground rents set by the federal

government. This resulted in confusion over whose rights were considered primary and whose secondary under the law.

It is clear from the *National Development Plan 2010/11-2014/15* that the GoU has firmly embraced neoliberal thinking. Its vision statement confirms this: “A Transformed Ugandan Society from a Peasant to a Modern and Prosperous Country within 30 Years” (National Development Plan 2010/11-2014/15, April 2010). Additionally, *The Uganda National Land Policy* states that its overall goal is “to ensure an efficient, equitable and optimal utilization and management of Uganda’s land resources for poverty reduction, wealth creation and overall socio-economic development” (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, 2013, p. 9). Both national and global factors have been influential in Uganda’s adoption of a modernization approach to land management and land reform.

### **National Level Factors: Maintaining Peace in a Multi-ethnic, Religiously Diverse Society with a History of Conflict**

Ethnicity and religion were two major cleavages that existed during and after the colonial period, and it is along these cleavages that civil war erupted (Tripp, 2010). The British had recognized the political and economic importance of the Buganda Kingdom, but desired to demilitarize the south and thus recruited Acholi, Iteso, and Langi into the military (Tripp, 2010). Once he finally defeated Obote in 1986, Museveni asserted that a no-party system was necessitated by the history of sectarian conflict in Uganda. Museveni at first deemphasized ethnic differences, however, over time he integrated mainly Westerners and Southerners into his administration while largely excluding Northerners, resulting in the disenfranchisement of the region (Carbone, 2008; Tripp, 2010). Though ethnic violence is relatively minimal in Uganda today, ethnic identity and competition remain important, though not always primary, factors when it comes to land relations.

Mahmood Mamdani (1996) contends that customary law was a mostly constructed myth utilized by the colonial powers to rule indirectly through chosen ethnic elites. Mamdani (1996) argued,

[I]ndirect rule was grounded in a legal dualism, central to which was the colonial construction of administrative justice called “customary law.” It was the antithesis of rule of law. It was, rather, legal arbitrariness. Indirect rule was the form of the state that framed the social life of the “free” peasantry. (p. 147)

Supporting this argument, Nkurunziza (2006), in describing security of tenure under the Buganda Kingdom, argued that because the king hired and fired chiefs at will, landholding was quite insecure for both the chiefs and peasants (p. 62). Catherine Boone (2014) argued convincingly that both colonial and post-colonial rulers in Africa have deliberately structured rural land regimes in order to better maintain political order in the countryside, and as a result, land clashes occur along ethnic rather than class lines (pp. 12-14). This ultimately benefits the state by

repressing broad-based, rural, class-based political organizing. Additionally, Elliot Green (2006) stated that one reason the Buganda resist land reform is that their identity is tied to land ownership and they fear outsiders taking over their land (p. 372). This is true in Northern Uganda as well where land is owned communally.

One reason the GoU has lacked success in land reforms is its unwillingness to consider ethnicity as a factor to be managed, even as it also manipulates ethnic identities in order to garner patronage and electoral support (Green, 2006). Green (2006) points out that the evolution of the NRM's current land policy was not without conflict itself, with both ideological clashes and threats to the personal (land) interests of the leadership (p. 376). Nevertheless, land reform has been envisioned as both a means of mitigating conflicts as well as a means of advancing the economic transformation of the state. Yet at the same time, the attempts at implementing reforms are at best half-hearted because it benefits the Museveni regime to perpetuate the status quo, maintaining patronage networks and catering to powerful elites, while appearing to be working towards reforms that the GoU argues will benefit peasants by giving them better tenure security or access to jobs within commercial ventures.

### **Museveni's Tenure**

Another factor influencing the policy environment related to land is the longstanding leadership of President Museveni. As the leader for nearly 30 years, Museveni is clearly entrenched as president and seeks to remain so. He has consolidated power through decentralization, patronage, and sidelining his most vocal opponents in a number of ways. In addition, he seeks to have greater regional influence. Politically, Museveni's own ambitions as a regional leader are evidenced by interventions he has undertaken in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Somalia, and his rise to leadership positions within regional organizations (Keeler, 2014). Museveni can advance his own prestige in East Africa through his leadership not only in regional institutions, but also by providing an example of economic success in East Africa. He champions regional integration and promotes investment, especially in the agro-processing sector, by external actors (Keeler, 2014). Advancing the interests of large landholders and investors, some of whom are also part of the government, also helps Museveni retain political power and reinforces the government's approach to land reform.

### **Agriculture Exports and Foreign Investment**

Uganda's reliance on agriculture exports necessitates the government's emphasis on modernizing the sector. Cash crops became a mainstay of the colonial economy, and still account for a significant portion of export earnings in Uganda today. Citing the World Bank and the Department of International Development (DFID), James (2010) reported that agricultural products contribute "32% in value added terms to the GDP (World Bank, 2007) and 83% of export earnings (DFID, 2004)," yet investments in agriculture have remained low and rural poverty rates remain high

(p. 361). The government's stake in maintaining and expanding this vital part of the economy is critical for both poverty reduction and for the patronage that is gained from supporting the interests of large investors. Several studies indicate that investment in low-value cash crops is not adequate to address rural poverty and rural land management (Bategeka et al., 2013; De Schutter, 2011; James, 2010), yet increasing high-value export crops and modernizing export supply chains can provide public welfare benefits (Maertens, Minten, & Swinnen, 2012).

But, even if there are adequate institutional supports and financial resources available, the transition from small-scale to large-scale agricultural production in Uganda is fraught with problems (Bategeka et al., 2013; Rugadya, 1999). The GoU is not itself unaware of these problems. In its *National Development Plan 2010/11-2014/15*, the government lists 19 constraints to agricultural development, not least of which are a weak policy, legal and regulatory framework, high risks and costs of investment, limited human resource capacity, inadequate physical infrastructure, production and post-production facilities, weak value chain links, and traditional and cultural attitudes towards change (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2010). Cognizant of these obstacles, it is not surprising that the GoU would cultivate relationships with investors interested in developing Uganda's land while gingerly attempting to convince local actors that it is also in their interests to transition from their traditional ways towards a modernization of the sector.

The *National Development Plan 2010-2015* emphasizes transformation of the economy from peasant to modern within 30 years, and asserts that this can be accomplished by maintaining independence and sovereignty, advancing democracy and the rule of law, establishing stability and peace, increasing the knowledge and skill base of its people, exploiting its resources gainfully and sustainably, and contributing to a strong federated East African common market (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2010). President Museveni's *Forward* to the document also reaffirms the government's commitment to liberalization of the economy. Museveni writes, "The Government will continue to pursue outward-oriented policies by encouraging foreign investments and exports with high value addition, as well as pursuing sound macroeconomic policy and management" (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2010, p. ii). Not only is modernization of the economy pursued, but so is the integration of markets in East Africa as a means of advancing economic power globally (Barigaba, 2012).

## Food Security

Population growth and the concerns over the impacts of climate change, when combined with limited productivity increases in the agriculture sector over time, create a serious concern for future food security. Section 6.10 of *The Uganda National Land Policy* is devoted to the threat of and necessary response to climate change (Ministry of Lands, 2013) while section 8.5 of the *National Development Plan 2010/11-2014/15* also centers on the need to prepare for global climate change's impacts on the economic and social development of the state (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2010). The population has jumped from 9,535,000



people in 1969 to 34,131,000 in 2012. As one of the fastest growing populations in Africa, Uganda is expected to have a population over 100 million by 2050 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2004). *The Uganda National Land Policy* points out that land fragmentation has already led to land degradation in highly populated areas because of continual tillage, and that fragmentation hinders productive land usage in different parts of the country (Ministry of Lands, 2013).

Further, agricultural production has stagnated. The Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE) reasons that lack of a functional and secure land tenure system that is enforceable by the state has led to conflicts between owners and tenants, disputed and ill-defined communal rights, and the general underdevelopment of land throughout the country (Uganda National Farmers Federation, n.d.). Bategeka, Kiiza, and Kasirye (2013) contend that, despite a number of serious constraints, some of which arose from liberalization of the sector, serious reforms are needed in order to boost agricultural production to meet the needs of the growing population. Reforms they recommend include nationalizing unused land, linking farming to high value added industries, encouraging household level food security, restoring cooperatives, expanding the northern “camp model” for improved services amongst rural communities, improving the convoluted land administrative structure, using agriculture as a platform for industrialization, and improving access to credit (Bategeka et al., 2013, p. 25). Their recommendations combine aspects of neoliberal reforms with suggestions for how to improve household level security, but they adopt an outlook that calls for overall modernization of the agriculture sector in Uganda (Bategeka et al., 2013). Numerous documents that the NRM government has produced echo these recommendations.

### **Global Level Factors: Global Capital, IFIs, and Investors**

Many academics have demonstrated that understanding the historical development of global capital is also vital to understanding the current struggles over land in the 21st century (Akram-Lodhi, Borras, & Kay, 2007; Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2010; Margulis, McKeon, & Borras, 2013). They finger the global financial institutions as key drivers of land use changes, and land grabbing specifically, and argue that one cannot understand local level land conflicts without understanding that the drivers of land use change have international as well as local roots (De Schutter, 2011; Global Land Project, 2010). Mamdani (2013) asserts more forcefully that the adoption of neoliberal market mechanisms in Uganda needs to be seen as a driving factor independent of the state and society, and that the market dynamic itself has major impacts on land tenure (how state and society view land ownership), land usage (what is considered appropriate and productive uses of land), and land conflict (how authority is structured to manage conflicts in land disputes). The expansion of global capital provides the framework within which two important global factors, the neoliberal agenda driven by donor governments and global financial institutions, and international investors and the government’s wooing of investment dollars, are embedded.

With the end of civil war in 1986, the Museveni government embraced Structural Adjustment Programs, then Poverty Eradication Action Plans, as recommended by the global financial institutions. The World Bank and some governments have celebrated Uganda as one of the better neo-liberal reformers in Africa. Further, the World Bank sees agriculture and land reform as key concerns. It has increased the number of land reform projects in its portfolio (Holden et al., 2009) as well as provided technical assistance in drafting laws and policy related to land use, direct financing to agribusiness firms, and political risk insurance to investors (Oakland Institute, 2011). Its economists have also been important voices in the debate over land reforms, writing numerous studies published both internally and in academic journals (Byamugisha, 2013; Deininger, Ayalew, & Yamano, 2006; Deininger & Okidi, 2003). The issue is critical not only in the local context of each state, but also to poverty eradication and global food security. Aside from the economic recovery programs dating back to the late 1980s, the World Bank in 2014 listed 29 projects in Uganda that cover a full range of technical support to specific sectors as well as general assistance in writing policy and planning for future development (World Bank Group, 2014).

Relatedly, the GoU has actively courted international investors in multiple sectors, including in the oil and gas sector since the discovery of deposits in the Albertine rift in 2010. The emphasis on investments complements the goal of maximizing the use of land. In both *The National Land Policy* and the *National Development Plan 2010-2015*, one clear goal is modernization of the agriculture sector. The government advocates shifting 65% of the peasants currently engaged in subsistence agriculture into commercial agriculture (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, 2013). At an address to the NRM National Executive Committee in April 2012, Museveni (2012) explained that the problem is that peasants need to get out of the “moneyless form of life” so that the country as a whole can achieve economic development through commercial agriculture.

From this understanding of the factors that influence land policy development in Uganda, I move to the analysis of agenda setting and how the adoption of a neoliberal mindset and a modernization approach to land reform has impacted the agenda setting process. Clearly, the structuring and writing of policy within Uganda does not necessarily mean that the policy will be carried out nor consistently applied. As Manji (2001) maintains, simply creating land laws in Africa has limited impact on successfully altering land relations (p. 2). Yet clearly, part of Museveni’s strategy of reform is to persuade the people to back his vision rather than just rely on the law to bring about change. Changes in norms and lifeways are required for a complete transformation of land usage anywhere, and the NRM government is advocating these changes to accompany land reforms. The next section explores how the GoU attempts to influence the transformation of lifeways and norms through agenda setting and analyzes the potential success of such attempts and the implications of success or failure on future conflicts.

## **Land Reform Agenda Setting in Uganda: Government Promises and Political Realities**

Both the *National Development Plan 2010/11-2014/15* and *The Uganda National Land Policy* are filled with reforms that are steeped in neoliberal economic theory. The government's stated goal to transform Uganda "from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years" (National Planning Authority, 2010, p. iii) requires that its agenda setting efforts are successful in convincing its constituents that changes to culture and way of life are both necessary and beneficial to themselves and the country. In looking at Museveni's statements over the past three years, he clearly believes that in order to achieve modernization, he must guide the nation to accept changes in lifeways, traditions, and even cultural norms. How Museveni frames his messages related to land, agriculture, and modernization is heavily influenced by the characteristics of his government, especially decentralization and balancing patronage networks that results in corruption, and also by the nature of Ugandan society, especially identity issues related to culture and ethnicity. These characteristics also act as constraints that prevent the implementation of land reforms.

### **Museveni's Uganda: Decentralization and Corruption**

Museveni's government has both authoritarian and democratic tendencies. Indeed, political actors undermine the consolidation of democracy on various fronts, for example through perpetuating extensive patronage networks, through arbitrary application of the law, or through repression of the media. Carbone (2008) argues that Museveni's external support has helped shield the regime from having to implement any real reforms that would give rise to a viable challenge to the NRM domination of the political system (p. 49). Many of Museveni's remarks over the past three years praise the benevolence of the NRM while excoriating anyone opposing the Movement. For example, on November 19, 2014, Museveni stated at a campaign rally,

[you] people of Amuru, you have an enemy within you. An enemy who is against your progress; who is opposing development. If money is bad, how much is [Opposition MP Gilbert] Oulanya getting from Parliament? Oulanya says Museveni is bad but money is good. When I try to bring your own incomes here opposition say government is bad. You should know you have an enemy. (November 19).

In over three dozen occasions reported by the State House, Museveni praises the NRM government for its benevolence and accomplishments, especially related to restoring peace and bringing about greater economic development. Additionally, it is prominently reported when someone from the Opposition defects to join the NRM and Museveni exhorts his fellow Movement members to warmly embrace these newcomers. By constantly promoting the work of the NRM government,

Museveni is able to promote his policy agenda as well as gain supporters. Clearly the Movement is Museveni's primary concern, not the advancement of democratic development and competition. The advancement of the Movement is facilitated also by the decentralization of the government into regional and local units, through which Museveni can consolidate NRM control down to the local level.

In 1986, there were 33 districts; by July 2012, the Government announced that it was creating an additional 25 new districts, to be implemented by July 2015, bringing the total to 136, plus Kampala (Odyek, Karugaba, & Walubiri, 2012). Within each district are four additional local council units, down to the village level. To put this in perspective, Uganda is less than a third the size of Nigeria and has one-fifth of its population, yet Nigeria is divided into only 36 regions. The logic of decentralization from a governance perspective is that it allows government agents to be more responsive and local level stakeholders to have more input. One reason that decentralization has been promoted in Africa is that centralized governments have largely failed to promote adequate economic and democratic growth, and greater accountability is expected through decentralization (Lambright, 2011, p. 2).

However, in Uganda, Green (2008) argues that decentralization has resulted in shifting conflicts from the national to the local stage, and to deepening of ethnic polarization across the country. In addition, he argues that decentralization has allowed Museveni to maintain greater control over local level politics rather than giving up power to local leaders (Green, 2008). For example, the central government has two representatives at the district level, the Resident District Commissioner, whose role is to ensure the central government's interests are represented and who is appointed by Museveni, and the Chief Administrative Officer, the top technocrat in each district, who is appointed by the Public Service Commission. Mamdani (1996) also argues that African state structures have created strong presidents and weak civil society. The conclusions he draws parallel the arguments of Green. In order to check civil society, African regimes have introduced reforms at the local rather than national level. Mamdani (1996) states,

[s]uch has been the nature of reforms introduced by Sankara, the early Rawlings, and Museveni. The thrust of each has been toward localized reform that seeks to incorporate rural constituencies in a state strategy designed to checkmate civil society demands for political representation in the central state. The structure of protest continues to be shaped by that of the state: fractured, fragmented, localized, and decentralized. (p. 150)

In Uganda, decentralization has resulted in heightened ethnic identity and regional loyalty. Even while he is preaching an agenda of unity, national development and progress for the nation, Museveni's own policies of decentralization have undercut the likelihood of these outcomes. Mamdani (2013) goes so far as to argue that the 1998 Land Act should be seen as "the latest phase in the modern state's endeavor to colonize society" (p. 2).

Because the central government needs policy buy-in from local leaders, it engages in agenda setting in local contexts. As one Ugandan NGO representative who works on peaceful negotiation of land issues in the North explained,

[L]ocal governments are very strong and important for managing land issues. Even the interests from the central state level need to go through the local governments in order to accomplish anything. So presumably if the central government wanted to develop some land in the north for oil or agriculture or other use, it would need to get cooperation and approval from the local government. (personal communication, May 24, 2013)

This is why Museveni travels around the country promoting modernization and the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture. In the three years examined, Museveni addressed a particular regional or ethnic group on land issues 115 times and he specifically urged cultural, ethnic, or religious leaders to encourage their people to adapt to the government's modernization agenda 43 times (Table 2). Often times, this nudge towards modernization takes place within a ceremonial context (71 times). Whether opening a school, honoring the death of a religious leader, or graduating police cadets, Museveni is consistently preaching modernization. Museveni understands that though his NRM government has a powerful hold on the electoral process, he still needs the cooperation of local leaders to implement change.

District governments implement local ordinances that impact land users and distribute funds that come from the central state, so their power is extensive. On Bugala Island, for example, a years-long process of experimentation, negotiation, and community-building through the cooperation of local government and community leaders was necessary ahead of the development of a palm oil plantation that was established in 2003. The agenda setting process of convincing local stakeholders took years, but eventually enough landowners decided that a modernization project for the island would benefit them, and the government was able to purchase the needed acreage for the project (Santiago, 2015). Though the project was a success from the government's perspective, there remains a sub-set of former tenants on the island who say their land was taken from them for the plantation, and some filed a lawsuit in February 2015 against the oil palm company for loss of land (Mwesigwa, 2015). The conflict on Bugala Island over land use needs to be understood in terms of the complex land tenure system that gives rights to land owners as well as land users. In late 2015 Museveni continued to address the situation, admonishing those opposed to palm oil production and government officials who tried to block similar projects (Lubulwa, 2015).

Corruption also impacts the process of decision-making on land questions, and has long been a concern at the local as well as federal level in Uganda. Nkurunziza (2006) asserted, "[p]robably the biggest challenge has been to restore the legitimacy of the state through the creation of institutions that transcend the old cleavages of religion and ethnicity and are devoid of corruption and nepotism" (p. 169). Carbone (2008) argued that the process of restructuring the country's economy, facilitated through Western donors, has expanded opportunities for corruption and patronage rather than reduced them (p. 68). Carbone (2008) concluded that the result was "to strengthen the gradual emergence of vested interests and the integration of a considerable section of the middle class—including the Baganda and Asian

businesses—into the regime” (p. 68). This reinforces perceptions throughout Uganda that the government is not concerned about all land users’ interests, but only those through which the government can continue to advance its own agenda and maintain its power.

**Table 1: Subjects of President Museveni’s Press Releases**

<b>Specific Word(s) Tracked for Press Releases (n=258) Dates Examined: 11/17/2012-5/13/2015</b>	<b>Number of times word(s) mentioned</b>
Modern	172
Modernization/modernize	18
Agriculture	184
Commercial agriculture	47
Poverty eradication/fight against poverty/ eradicate poverty	33
Household income (generation)	55
Corruption	20
Service delivery	13
Industry/industrialization	97
Invest/investment(s)/investor(s)	370
Development/developing	336
Trade/trading	37
Sectarian/sectarianism/tribal/tribalism	27
Unity/united (Uganda or Africa)	34
Hard work/work hard/discipline	48
Attitude	4
Land	354
Land fragmentation/fragmenting land	71
Transformation (social)	47
Production/productivity/engage in production	218
Agriculture (al) production	27
Prosperity/wealth creation/create wealth	93
The opposition	27
NRM/The Movement	243
The government	96
Wananchi (the common people)	84
Sensitize	35

Note: Press releases on the Uganda State House website examined cover the period 11/17/2012 to 05/13/2015. I used a content analysis to analyze key words in 258 remarks by President Museveni, counting each instance of the word separately.

One peasant farmer in Amuru reported that one difficulty the people had was with the way financing works for projects. He stated that money flows from the central bank to the district then local levels, and along each step there is corruption so that in the end, money does not get to the intended communities (personal communication, June 2, 2013). In interviews with stakeholders in both the North and South of Uganda in 2013, corruption was mentioned repeatedly. Many were

pessimistic. One authority at a cultural center stated that people do not trust the government, and until there can be some trust, land issues will not be resolved. Corruption is a big problem. People see land as their only resource and since they do not trust the government they do not want to cooperate in titling the land (personal communication, June 4, 2013). He was not optimistic, “without good governance, nothing can happen” (personal communication, June 4, 2013). Another local researcher noted, “people would rather stay poor on their land than throw in their lot with investors and government whom they do not trust” (personal communication, June 4, 2013). Museveni himself acknowledges corruption within the government, but his remarks indicate that he blames corruption on local political leaders and bureaucrats, and distances the NRM government from the problem of corruption. For example, in addressing Resident District Commissioners in April 2014, Museveni (2014) stated, “The problem is corruption and negligence by *you people* [emphasis added]. The law on land is very clear. It is *you people* [emphasis added] who cause corruption. When the representative of the President becomes useless, the system is in trouble.”

**Table 2: Specific Audiences of President Museveni’s Speeches**

Audience to whom President Museveni is Speaking	Number of Times Addressing this Particular Audience
Students/youth	22
Particular ethnic/regional group	115
Farmers/peasants	12
All Ugandans (specifically mentions addressing the country)	25
Ceremonial-infrastructure, industry, service provision	46
Ceremonial-religious, ethnic, or cultural	25
Cultural/ethnic/religious leaders	43
Visiting dignitaries or resident foreign dignitary	43
Investors/industry leaders	50
Government reps/bureaucrats/cabinet members	98
Military/police personnel	20

Note: A single speaking engagement might include multiple audiences (e.g., youth of a particular ethnic group). 11/17/2012 to 05/13/2015.

## Culture, Identity, and Land Policy

A second major factor that greatly impacts the agenda setting attempts of the GoU is how culture and identity are tied to the land. For example, the Buganda Kingdom was historically divided into 52 clans and several sub-clans each ruled by a chief with the *Kabaka* ruling over all and distributing land according to the importance of the chief (Nkurunziza, 2006). People were free within the Buganda kingdom to choose which chiefs to live under resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship whereby the chief provided security and general welfare and allocated land to his

subjects while they in turn respected him, paid him tribute, and occasionally worked for him (Nkurunziza, 2006). But, because the *Kabaka* had discretion in keeping or getting rid of chiefs, land tenure was insecure for many and adult males often sought land that was not allocated by the king claiming customary usufruct rights after living on and utilizing it for a period of time (Nkurunziza, 2006). When the British arrived, land was divided into *mailo*, reserved for the *Kabaka* and his subjects, and crown land reserved for the British. It was during the colonial period that large landowners became important stakeholders (some becoming today's absentee landowners) and that cash crops were introduced in Central and Western Uganda (Nkurunziza, 2006).

In the North, customary ownership remains the dominant land tenure system. Land access in the north was based on needs: hunting, gathering, farming, pasture, settlement. Traditional laws governed access rights and reflected societal norms and spirituality. Customary land ownership in the North promotes unity and commitment to a traditional way of life (personal communication, June 8, 2013). This approach to land is in direct opposition to the government's modernization agenda, and the government's agenda setting capacity depends on acceptance by the people of its vision. Museveni's remarks across the country are saturated with references to modernization, promoting transition from peasant agriculture to commercial agriculture and processing facilities as a value added good. In his speeches and remarks, Museveni promoted modernization 190 times, he discussed investment 370 times, addressed poverty eradication and promoted household income generation over 80 times, and mentioned development over 330 times. Most interesting, however, was his admonishment of people for following traditional customs. For example, he advised cultural leaders at the official opening of the 2014 circumcision period in the Bugisu Sub-region in August 2014 that "African culture and customs had reasons; some are relevant today while others are irrelevant in modern times. Therefore, you cultural leaders should audit these cultural practices and see the ones to retain and the ones that can be modernized" (Museveni, 2014, August 19, n.p.).

His remarks to army officers in January 2015 are representative of his general approach to encouraging reforms. His tone was paternal and his words evoked the wisdom he was departing. For example, he stated, "[p]olitical education is the food of ideology. It is very important that political education is emphasized in the Army. Ideology is the systematic way of how one looks at the World" (Museveni, 2015, n.p.). Additionally in this press release, Museveni praised his government for achieving peace in the country, and explicated the four major principles to progress: patriotism, Pan-Africanism, social economic transformation, and education (Museveni, 2015). In speaking about socio-economic transformation, Museveni (2015) emphasized that the major problem of poverty in the country was that there is a lack of educated peasants who insist on sticking to traditions such as cattle rearing using traditional methods. He further instructed his audience by telling them that the people cannot behave in traditional ways while living within a modern global era (Museveni, 2015).



What Museveni ignores in his paternalistic speeches and rational approach to modernity is that identity and culture are tied to the land. The 1998 *Land Act* recognizes customary tenure as well as Uganda's other tenure systems, but Mamdani (2013) maintains that in effect the logic behind this recognition is to subordinate the customary rules of tenure to state law and to deliberately set in place the process for converting land tenure systems in Uganda to a unified freehold system that is controlled by the state. The GoU clearly believes that a harmonized land tenure system is necessary for land and agricultural reforms to be effective, but at present the multiple tenure systems and multiple levels of bureaucracy that exist side-by-side do not complement one another, so there is confusion over rights and those best able to take advantage of the confusion tend to prosper. But, because identity and culture are tied to the land, many resist these changes for fear of the consequences to their way of life. As one NGO worker in Northern Uganda stated, "I don't trust my government, I'm sorry to say. The government should not take over the land. If land is taken away it will affect identity and it would take away security of the community that looks out for each other" (personal communication, June 4, 2013). Evidence from Museveni's remarks show that he does not so much engage in discussions with land users over the best approach to land reform as he promotes a particular modernization approach with the expectation that the people will follow his guidance because it is the right thing to do. As another typical example, in remarks to Resident District Commissioners regarding land conflicts, Museveni (2014) urged his audience, "You need to sensitize people on how to live a prosperous life by being a producer, not a parasite" (n.p.). He further urged them to "kill the peasantry" by impressing on people the need to give up subsistence agriculture and turn to commercial agriculture because this will then lead to the transformation of the society and economy (Museveni, 2014).

### **Non-government Actors and Land Policy**

The government also has to contend with civil society organizations that are often opposed to its modernization agenda. Local views of identity, culture, and lifeways are represented through a variety of civil society organizations, including the Uganda Land Alliance (ULA), the Land and Equity Movement Uganda (LEMU), and the Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE). These organizations utilize similar strategies including educating stakeholders about their rights and duties under the law, advocating on behalf of poor land users, monitoring the government's adherence to its own laws, and producing reports to advance their policy positions. They are often vocal actors protesting specific land deals or advocating for the protection of *bona fide* occupants whose land is threatened, yet there are differences in how each envisions land reform.

The ULA is a coalition of over 60 partners and is often at odds with the government's land policies. The ULA argues that conflicts over land are exacerbated by the government's lack of political will in resolving them, and they are well known for their sensitization campaigns on land laws and for encouraging local stakeholders to vocalize their concerns to their local representatives. The ULA

actively attempted to influence the *1998 Land Law* by educating poor peasants and encouraging them to pressure their representatives to shape the law to advance their own interests, forming alliances with international NGOs, and by directly engaging with policy-makers in the debate over land policy through open letters, radio programs, press releases, and face-to-face meetings (Nkurunziza, 2006). The ULA's contentious relationship with the government is represented by its threatened de-registration by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2012 for its part in producing a report on land grabbing issued in 2011 by Oxfam. The Ministry accused the ULA of falsely advancing claims of "land grabbing" in Uganda and of disparaging the name of the President (Vidal, 2012).

LEMU partners with local leaders, civil society organizations, and local government officials to advance the interests of the poor on land deals and policy development. LEMU works mainly in the north and east of the country, and provides education, legal advocacy, mediation, and monitoring services on behalf of poor landowners and land users in areas that are under customary land tenure systems. The organization asserts that protecting customary land tenure systems and vulnerable land users is essential to any land policy. LEMU (2014) advances that individual titling of land will hurt rather than help land users, especially women (Land and Equity Movement). The organization is less well-connected than the ULA and its scope of advocacy is narrower, but it is an important educational resource in northern Uganda.

The UNFFE advocates on behalf of farmers in order to create a policy environment that is supportive of their needs. It developed out of a government-sponsored competition between 1988 and 1992 to reward the best farmers and pastoralists in the country (Harms, Meijerink, & Mwendya, 2013). The UNFFE is composed of 78 regional and sector specific associations as well as farmer-service oriented companies (Harms et al., 2013). It focuses on institution building and lobbying as well as providing general support services to Uganda's farmers. Its projects include enhancing youth's access to farming resources, expanding financial services to farmers, lobbying the local governments in Eastern Uganda on behalf of farmers, and projects related to food security. In 2010-11, the UNFFE partnered with several other institutions to undertake an assessment of farmers' perceptions of National Agriculture Advisory Services (NAADS) that was widely seen to be inefficient and corrupt (Harms et al., 2013). The results were presented at a workshop attended by representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, civil society organizations, international NGOs, and Makerere University, among others. In 2014, NAADS was dismantled and in July, Museveni appointed, and his Cabinet approved, the Army to oversee advisory and extensions services in the agriculture sector, after attending a training program at Makerere.

In attempting agenda setting on land related issues, the Museveni government must take into account the alternatives envisioned by these organizations, as well as by other vocal actors in the country. Repeatedly advocating for modernization, progress, commercial agriculture, and for praising the successes of the NRM government can be understood as agenda setting not only for a particular vision, but also against what others, including some NGOs, propose as an alternative.

Museveni regularly criticizes various people who oppose the NRM agenda in his remarks across the country, and is especially critical of anyone in a leadership position who might oppose the government. The fact that Museveni addresses any of this opposition to his own policies is evidence that the NRM government is quasi-democratic rather than entirely autocratic. As much as Museveni has tried to convince supporters and skeptics to buy into his vision of progress, there are other voices that advance alternatives with whom he must contend.

## **Conclusion: Power and Persuasion under Neoliberal Reforms**

Uganda is experiencing a stark contrast between the political leadership promoting a particular vision of modernization and the realities of achieving modernization. As discussed, long-standing cultural ties between the people and their land along with the pervasive patterns of government corruption create a difficult context for the type of agricultural and economic modernization promoted by Museveni. This plan only seems realistic if the majority of peasants can shift from their trust in cultural traditions and ways of life tying people to land to a trust in fair governmental regulation and jurisprudence controlling land use and ownership. De Soto (2005) asserts that through property rights enforcement, rule of law is established, trust builds within society, and democracy can emerge. In Uganda, the overwhelmingly pervasive experience of corruption, from local government officials up to national elites who benefit from modernization projects, prevents such a shift from occurring in the near term. The NRM's adoption of a neoliberal approach to modernization has been received well by business owners and international lenders, but the vast majority of local land users require more than persuasion in order to achieve the goals of the government. The largest obstacle to achieving modernization in Uganda remains the government itself, and if it is indeed sincere in its goals, its first priority must be building trust between itself and the people rather than trying to persuade them through paternalistic rhetoric. The most constructive way to achieve this is through democratizing the political system—creating an environment whereby opposition voices are taken seriously and allowed to compete with the NRM's vision for the future. Without true acceptance by the peasants that changes to their ways of life will be beneficial to them in the long run, which requires trust in Museveni's vision, there cannot be change in Uganda, nor modernization, nor transition of the people off their land into more productive endeavors.

This discussion of the state's attempts to convince the people of Uganda that modernization is the correct path for the country is important for several reasons: the economic future of Uganda is at stake, the potential for conflict over land is high, and the role of government in moving the people towards a different way of life is questionable. Uganda has had decades of ethno-political conflict, and the wounds of those decades remain and influence political and economic successes and failures. With the growing population combined with the low productivity of the land, there is the potential for land conflicts to increase and turn increasingly violent. Without a rational land policy that the people can stand behind and believe

in, there will continue to be contentious relations between the people and the government, firms, and each other over land. The potential for violence is high, and Uganda's economic future is at stake. Whether or not the government can move people towards a modernization agenda and different way of life hinges greatly on its ability to convince them that this is the right future for themselves as individuals and for Uganda as a country. This has yet to be achieved because of the lack of trust in the government. The Museveni government has to grant the people much more participation in their own futures than it currently is prepared to do. Lessons learned from Uganda are important to explore in other African nations undergoing similar transitions, and additional case studies are needed to better understand the limitations of state-led modernization policies.

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